

PAPER CRANES: VIDEO GAME DEVELOPMENT AS ART THERAPY

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HONORS PROJECT

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Project Summary

Paper Cranes is a project in two parts: on the one hand, it is a collection and synthesis of research built around the theory that video game development—and more abstractly, the construction of narrative—can be a method of therapy, or at least be seen as a therapeutic process. The research approaches this thesis through the analysis and eventual connection of three concepts: firstly, that video games can function as art, both due to the nature of their creation, and through their aesthetic and technical development; secondly, that playing video games—both alone and with others—can function as a therapeutic process through connections with others and with the narratives and themes presented in the game; thirdly and lastly, that art—specifically the creation of art—can function as a therapeutic process.

Through the interlocking of these three ideas, with the inclusion of the increased accessibility of the medium of video games and the field of video game development, creators can not only make video games as a vehicle for introspection and expression of thoughts and feelings, but can also communicate and connect to others who may be experiencing similar emotions.

On the other hand, *Paper Cranes* is actually a game—almost a proof-of-concept for the aforementioned research. *Paper Cranes* is an interactive visual novel that follows the story of Hase, a young, troubled rabbit girl, as she attempts to escape from the Cells, a metaphysical prison crafted from her own insecurities and anxieties. Along the way, with the help of an empathetic guard—the aggressively protective Katz—she must face scenarios that echo the troubles that have tied her down to the Cells in order to come to terms with her own identity and embrace her own strength.

The characters, dialogue, and settings of the game are all, in one way or another, literal or figurative, a part of me. Hase, the main character of the game, and the lens through which the player views the narrative, has anxieties that are my anxieties, and so on. This game is a process of me making sense out of myself; of trying to cope with many of the thoughts and fears that I have had my whole life and some I have just developed recently. It is story about identity, about the elements that define us (ourselves, the people in our lives, our environments), and about accepting who you are as a person.

These themes are shown through the player character, Hase, and the scenarios she must overcome. Each event that Hase must confront (The Cells with their shadow denizens, memories of first trauma, and her own existence and its implications) causes her to grow and come to terms with the type of person she is, her aspirations, her values, and how she is an amalgam of many elements (shown by her interactions with Katz, the companion character). Through these events, Hase must stand up to her own self-destructive thoughts (characterized by Gauner, the antagonist character), and become a whole, instead of a fragment of a self.

In briefer terms, Paper Cranes is an illustration of my own internal struggles, expressed in an interactive medium in order to not only create a narrative, but for me to make sense of these conflicts and maybe even connect with a player who might share these struggles.

Since accessibility is so important in this concept even being possible, I wanted to make a website that could serve as both a place where the game could be found for download, but also a repository for the research and other resources. The site is live at *papercranes.artfulhypothesis.com*: attached are static screenshots of the site, both the home page and one of the research sections.

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The Cells. A prison, but not of the sort you're used to. You don't get brought here, you just end up here. When the going gets too rough. When the weight of the world crushes you. When you feel like you're shattering into thousands of pieces of glass that just cut you the more you try to put them back together.

For everyone in The Cells, inmate or guard, there's something that anchors them here, something that keeps them from escaping back into the world. Face that thing, understand it, and you can get out. Not many people succeed, even when The Cells change to show you, to present you with it. Self-awareness served on a silver platter. It's easy to choke on it.

Most people who wind up here never get out. Some just disappear. Some become shades, haunting the ever-changing halls of this place. Others...others change into something else entirely, something separate from what they once were. Guards of the place that trapped them.

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Video Games as Art

With our previously established definitions of [art](#) (the result of the act of creation with artistic intent by the creator) and [video games](#) (typically a combination of interactivity (gameplay), story, and aesthetics, all tied together by an element of player agency) established, drawing the line between the two doesn't seem as daunting as initially thought: there's always some reservation in disestablishing the norm that exists in a culture (this norm being that the only things worthy of being called art are those that can exist within galleries, those that function within very strict definitions: definitions we've changed). If a video game is created with artistic intent by someone, then wouldn't it stand that the result of the development process for the game is art, with everything that has been contested as being valid art?

It seems like a pretty easy line to draw, in my opinion, and it's one that's finally starting to solidify a lot more in the past decade than it ever has before. While many art scholars would probably still cringe at the thought of video games being included in a gallery setting among paintings and sculptures—generally being a product often made for mass consumption, and thusly (in their ideology) not being worthy of being called "art"—even those high echelons of "fine art" are starting to recognize the value in the medium. A recent Smithsonian exhibition—fittingly titled "[The Art of Video Games](#)"—explored the historic development of video games as an interactive medium: from the early bips and boops of a Commodore 64 (or my own personal introduction to video games, the Mattel Intelelevision. Look it up, it's awesome) to the high resolution graphics and processing power of today's technology.



The *Art of Video Games* Exhibition as seen at the Toledo Museum of Art.